

No Teddy Bear's Picnic

I gripped my teddy bear and felt the warmth of salty tears trickle down my face as I sat there quietly, waiting for my mother. I wasn't in the back seat of my mother's white Nissan XS for long, but I knew that things would be different from now on. Mom stumbled towards the car, hands shaking. The tears streaming down her face matched my own and I watched, silently, as she got into the car. I squeezed my teddy bear harder than before, hoping to find some sense of comfort in this toy that I had since I was first born.

As the car door opened, I heard my father's continued shouting. Mom didn't turn to look at me; she just sat in the front seat sobbing quietly. My father got closer to the car, his arms still waving in the air, motioning to her. With the windows rolled up, I just heard angry sounds but could not understand any words. My mother turned to her left to pull the seat belt around her chest and waist. She slowly put the car key in the ignition and the engine came alive.

As this real-life movie unfolded, I felt the impossibility of the situation. How could this couple be my parents? *My parents were happy, responsible and funny.*

The shouting finally stopped. My father stood there, motionless, looking over at me in the back seat. He looked at me with sad eyes, as if he was trying to talk to me without speaking. *"Noemi, this may be the last time we see each other. But if it is, you need to know, that I love you very much,"* I heard him say with his eyes.

Suddenly, I was the one who was angry. "Stop the car! Let me out! Stop!" I recognized the shouting voice as my own. My hands began to bang on the window as I pleaded with my father to let me out of the car. I began to scream at my mother, but it was already too late. The car was in motion and we began to drive away through the city streets.

It is 2004. I am grown and graduating from Rutgers University. I look in the mirror, as I continue my graduation preparation. "*Boy, this cap looks funny.*" I think to myself. The teddy bear from my childhood sits on my dresser, staring at me, as I continue to fidget with my cap. "*I know, I know, Mr. Bear, I look silly.*" I mumble. I hear a knock on the bedroom door and my mother walks inside holding her new, large camera with extra zoom features.

"I have to say, I am very proud of you, Noemi." she gushes.

"Thanks, Mom." I reply and smile.

"You know, after your father, you are the second person in our family to graduate from college. He would have been proud too," she says.

This time, I didn't respond, but I began to think about my father, the man who we drove away from over twenty years before. I knew now that their relationship was not as wonderful as I had romanticized. I had blamed myself for many years, thinking that it was my fault my parents didn't make it, weren't happy, and ultimately, divorced.

I look into my mother eyes and say, "I know he would have been. Thanks for always being there for me, Mom."

"You were the best thing to ever happen to me, Noemi. ***To us...***don't ever forget that," she responds, tears beginning to form in her eyes. She pauses, her lips still quivering but she manages a smile and cheerfully shouts, "Now, let's go! We have a graduation to go to!"

She was right; the only direction I wanted to look in was forward. It was time to move on, no longer blame myself for my parent's tumultuous relationship and look ahead to the journey that waits. I grabbed my mother's hand and we walked out my bedroom together, cap and gown in place, ready to celebrate the future.